3:AM MAGAZINE
WHATEVER IT IS, WE'RE AGAINST IT
SINCE 2000

Turing-cops and cyborg cat-women

By Carl CederstrÃ¶m.

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(image above from "#accelerate", Diann Bauer, 2014, A single screen video work produced for the launch of #Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader published by Urbanomic, 2014. The format of the video is inspired by Spritz high speed reading technology.)

Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities*, Zero Books 2014

I'm not sure we ever got into a conversation or not, but he used to sit there, each Friday, in the corner of the bar, reading a book, waiting for the place to fill with the chatter of disgruntled office-workers. Actually, thinking back more carefully, we could never have spoken, because I don't think I ever saw him without his headphones on.

He went by the name of Horatius, and he was a local celebrity in the Swedish city MalmÃ¶ (now immortalized by the detective television series *The Bridge*). Horatius was known for one thing: Operation Turtle, which took place in 1993. It was a politico-philosophical protest—he would ostentatiously argue—expressed by his pulling the emergency brake on the then relatively new fast train X2000. In the aftermath of the operation he made a few strategic appearances on TV shows, explaining his philosophical message: we need to slow down.

Around the same time as Operation Turtle, the philosopher Nick Land took up a position at Warwick University. While it's hard to capture the spirit of Land in one sentence, perhaps it would work, as a shorthand description, to say that he was a universe apart from Horatius. Or maybe he was like Horatius turned inside out. An inversion of someone who, desperate to gain media attention, would engage in a publicity stunt in order to express platitudes about the derailing nature of a society defined by blind progress. Land wasn't just avoiding that sort of media attention—at the end of his time at Warwick he's said to have only rarely left his office—he was also looking at speed from a radically different angle. In the face of a capitalist train about to lose control, Land wouldn't want the train to slow down, and to get back on track, but to speed up, and be left to its own machinic power.

Accelerationism—the idea that the appropriate response in the face of capitalist deterritorialization is to speed up rather than to slow down—goes back to Marx, and has since had a complicated conceptual history, passing

through Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard and Lyotard before culminating in Land. Accelerationism has an unmistakably excessive character. There is something slightly mad about it—but no madder, one may argue, than the world we're up against. It is madness against madness. Deterritorialization against deterritorialization. It is, in Land's words, a machinic revolution that goes against socialistic regulation, seeking ever more marketization so that the social field can be brought down from within.

Benjamin Noys' new book, *Malign Velocities*, provides a thoughtful and critical examination of the story of accelerationism. "To be clear from the start", Noys writes in the preface, "I don't agree with this story". One might expect that what follows will be a frontal assault, a furious smack-down of a long line of straw men. But Noys' book is nothing like that. On the contrary, much of it consists of discussions of rather irresistibly interesting characters. One such character is the proletarian poet Aleksei Gastev, who unreservedly celebrated speed, enthusiastically championed the immersion of the human animal into the machine, and was eager to "plunge into the 'whirlpool' of a new epoch". Despite his best efforts to be a good communist, Gastev was disliked by those in power. He was charged with counter-revolutionary terrorist activities, and killed. Noys nicely sums this up, using a quote from Ustryalov: "The revolution is merciless not only toward those who lag behind it but also those who run ahead of it".

This register of accelerationist pundits includes many other exciting personalities, including Victor Tausk. William Gibson, Thomas Pynchon, and Jean-Luc Godard. Each of them is examined with nuance and care, as figures who express different accelerationist inclinations. However, the more radical accelerationists, including Land, are treated less favorably, and are held accountable for two fundamental vices. The first is that they subscribe to a quasi-Marxist idea that "the very worst will produce the 'good'". This, Noys argues, is a fatal misunderstanding:

> Marx welcomed worker struggles to reduce the working day and to struggle against the despotism of the factory; he did not argue that it would be better if factory conditions got worse so workers would be forced into revolt. The fact that history advances by the bad side does not mean we should celebrate the 'bad side', but rather recognize this is the ground on which we struggle, which must be negated to constitute a new and just social order.

The second critique that Noys levels against accelerationists is that they have an unfortunate tendency to confuse fantasy with the Real. Or, to be more precise, they collapse the former into the latter. Accelerationists, Noys says, are misguided by "a fantasy of the end of fantasy"—a dream of an unmediated encounter with the 'Real', where man, as he becomes machine, gives rise to new productive forces. The fundamental problem with this line of reasoning, Noys goes on to argue, is that it fails to consider the extent to which accelerationism itself is subject to libidinal fantasies.

These allegations have been made before, especially in relation to Å½iÅ¾ek and Badiou—both of whom have been accused of slipping into a 'passion for the real,' and thus forgetting that the real should be understood as a limitation, a reminder that we are not just incomplete in our own petty subjectivity but that there is an irredeemable limitation at the heart of the social.

This suspicion is justifiable, but perhaps it presents itself too readily—almost by default—whenever the word 'revolution' is uttered. Nick Land's vision of the revolution doesn't involve a serious examination and contestation of its own libidinal attachments—that's undeniably true—but such a contestation would distort the Landian project into something very different.

It's hard to disagree with Noys' reservations about what he describes as "accelerationist fantasies." He doesn't take any cheap shots, and presents his critique in a tempered and sober fashion. Nonetheless, this kind of critique

disregards one of the defining features of Land's work—namely its style; its relentless formal experimentation, which produced a fascinating sort of theory-fiction. Reading Land is an exhilarating experience, as his writing doesn't just mimic but merges with the processes it tries to describe. This inventive style was one of Land's two indisputable 'heresies,' says Robin Mackay, co-editor of his collected writings, *Fanged Noumena*, published in 2011. The second heresy, Mackay continues, lay in Land's "dedication to thinking the *real processes* of Capital's insidious takeover of the human," and his "admitting the laughable impotence of 'man' in the face of this process".

These aspects of Land's philosophy don't get much attention during Noys' otherwise perceptive examinations. We get the well-known quote where Land remixes Deleuze and Guattari:

> Machinic revolution must therefore go in the opposite direction to socialistic regulation; pressing towards ever more uninhibited marketization of the process that are tearing down the social field, 'still further' with 'the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization' and 'one can never go far enough in the direction of deterriorialization: you haven't seen anything yet'.

This has become a mini-manifesto of accelerationism. What we don't get here is Land's much more satirical vision of what comes next, when the marketplace withers away and we step into cyberspace. This is what Land sees: "The terminal social signal blotted out by technofuck buzz from desiring-machines". And he goes on, inimitably:

> Suddenly it's everywhere: a virtual envelopment by recyclones, voodoo economics, neo-nightmares, death-trips, skin-swaps, teraflops, Wintermute-wasted Turing-cops, sensitive silicon, socket-head subversion, polymorphic hybridizations, descending data-storms, and cyborg cat women stalking amongst the screens.

How should we approach these visions? To be sure, it isn't easy to subject them to a sober academic analysis, and that's the mounting difficulty that Noys must have faced and wrestled with as he was working on this book. If, to quote Elvis Costello, "writing about music is like dancing about architecture," then what is it like to write about Nick Land? It's challenging, no doubt. About as challenging as talking sense to Turing-cops, and persuading them that going on a death-trip might not be a good idea.

If we wish to view accelerationism as a story with a set of distinct philosophical premises, based on the assumption that humans can be liberated only by becoming-machine, then it's a story that calls for suspicion. A world defined by machinic *jouissance*, 'descending data-storms' and 'cyborg cat-women', is certainly not for everyone. But is the sole point of accelerationism to present a totalitarian metanarrative, characterized by utopian/dystopian visions of the future? When I read Land, I see something else. I can't help seeing the work of a satirical mind—one which invents outrageously excessive strategies for resistance. In *Post Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro writes—and I would agree with this—"when we are told that There Is No Alternative… then perhaps there is some value in the exhaustive demonstration [of accelerationism] that what we actually have, right here, right now, is not a viable alternative either".

The accelerationist strategy, then, consists in demonstrating this deadlock and introducing a sense of inevitable disruption. This is the same kind of strategy that Adam Kotsko employs in *Why We Love Sociopaths*: the problem is not that we are sociopaths, but that we are not sociopathic enough. Another example is Ivor Southwood's claim, in *Non-Stop Inertia,* that we should not disconnect ourselves from the rituals of the workplace but instead act them out, fully and with no discernible distance, so that their untenable nature is exposed. Such strategies acknowledge our laughable impotence in the face of capital's takeover, and respond with increased impotence. If we are told to be sociopaths, then we will be furiously sociopathic.

I have much more sympathy for these strategies than Noys does. For him, accelerationism is not just a strategy for resistance. It is an ideological fantasy of misery and nostalgia—one which refuses to let go of its libidinal attachment.

This fantasy must be resisted, and as the book draws to an end, Noys begins sketching an alternative. What we need, he says, is a new political sensibility that breaks with fantasies of the Real. The hero of this story is Walter Benjamin. In his essay 'On the Concept of History', Benjamin invokes the figure of the emergency brake—although not the same kind of brake that Horatius pulled. Horatius was a forerunner of the ideology of the slow, arguing that we need to calm down, become mindful, spend more time in cafes, grow organic vegetables and cultivate our culinary senses. (For the Swedish election in 1998 Horatius even launched *Bakpartiet*, a political party that was fighting technological progress by immersing themselves in baking). Needless to say, Benjamin's emergency brake has a rather different meaning. Instead of nostalgically trying to invoke a bygone era, he used the brake as a figure of interruption. This gave way to a form of interruptive politics that remained attentive to productive forces, and particularly wary, Noys adds, of those forces "that have gone off the rails". So we should not speed up, and accelerate into destruction. But neither should we simply stop the train and bake cupcakes (we're all familiar with the spread of "cupcake fascism"). Instead, Noys suggests, we should jump the tracks, in the name of the new. Exactly what "the new" would look like is unclear but one place to start, he suggests, is with the "struggle for decommodification of our lives".

These suggestions sound reasonably plausible to me. I agree that there might be better ways to respond to the 'horror of work' than with the '*jouissance* of machinic desire'. But Noys only tentatively points towards a way forward, suggesting, for example, that the "struggles over the state and condition of labor… have to be fought now". This is less a book about alternatives to accelerationism, more an attempt at tracing and exposing its fantasmatic core.

Malign Velocities works well as a critical introduction to accelerationism, and is a perfect complement to Mackay and Avanessian's *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. It deftly combines academic erudition with a journalistic eye for unexpected details. Accelerationism is not immune from criticism, and Noys' book is a helpful reminder of that. Still, approaching accelerationism from an academic perspective is problematic. In particular, treating Land's theories from this standpoint risks overshadowing what we may call his method. "Theory", Mark Fisher perceptively writes about Land's approach to philosophy, "wasn't being 'applied' here; it was being plugged in". As a result, the academic voice was displaced and the homeland of thought blown to pieces.

The work of Nick Land and Sadie Plant at the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), was conceived *against* academia. Simon Reynolds describes CCRU as a rogue unit, "the academic equivalent of Kurtz: the general in Apocalypse Now who used unorthodox methods to achieve superior results compared with the tradition-bound US military." It was perhaps no surprise that the philosophy department at Warwick pushed Land out in the late 1990s. His work was an assault on self-serving academics, who Mark Fisher fittingly calls "careerist sandbaggers". That isn't simply an incidental detail; it's a crucial contextual factor. What Land was part of inventing in the 1990s, and what his followers continued to act out in various contexts, should not be reduced to a libidinally confused and miserable group of postgraduates trapped in wild machinic dreams of overthrowing capitalism. It's also an intensely imaginative para-academic movement, a fascinating reaction to the professionalization of higher education, a wild force that ceaselessly pushed the limits of thought. Sadly, Land's recent flirtation with the neo-reactionary work of Mencius Moldbug has made these insights, which are as relevant today as they were then, in the 1990s, all the more difficult to discern.

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